

the Wacker Squad



The unofficial homicide division logo.

By Howard Altman
Photos by Michèle Frentrop

It is just around noon Thursday. Philadelphia Police homicide detective Marty Devlin pulls a sawed-off shotgun out of the gray cabinet in the cramped office of Lt. Joe Washlick, head of the division's Special Investigations Unit. Pumping the lever that cocks the deadly weapon, Devlin checks to see that it will work, if needed, out on the street.

Satisfied that the gun is fully operable, Devlin, dressed in jeans and a gaudy multi-colored garment his colleagues have dubbed "The Pac Man Shirt," walks out of the office. He joins his partner, Paul Worrell, who is nattily attired in a suit and armed only with the standard-issue Glock 9 mm.

The two men, partners since 1992, leave nothing to chance. They are searching for Stevie Blount, one of the city's most notorious reputed drug dealers and a man wanted for, among other things, ordering the 1989 slaying of Wilbur Thomas Jr.

"You always have to be prepared," says Devlin as he gathers up a file full of paperwork — the printed record of Blount's violent history. "It's when you aren't prepared that you get hurt."

There is much at stake as Devlin and Worrell hop in the beat-up black Plymouth

Grand Fury that will take them from the Round House at 8th and Race to Blount's base of operations near 25th and Sergeant.

Five years after Thomas' murder, thanks to prisoners and others who have come forward as witnesses, Devlin and Worrell say they finally have enough evidence to put Blount away. If only they can find him.

"We will," says Worrell from behind the wheel. "Sooner or later, we get them all."

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Marty Devlin and Paul Worrell are part of the Wacker Squad, 17 homicide detectives who specialize in cracking unsolved cases. The squad, which has solved nearly 400 cases in the last five years, has helped make the Philadelphia Police Department the best in the country when it comes to arresting killers.

Officially known as the homicide division's Special Investigations Unit (SIU), the Wacker Squad earned its more colorful moniker back when it was informally created in the late '70s in response to a series of robbery-related killings in Olney. At the time, the annual homicide rate had jumped from 292 in 1969 to 460 two years later. It was the biggest two-year increase in

killings in the city's history.

Led by the now-retired Lt. Robert Shelton, described by veterans as a "free-spirited kind of guy," the unit became known as the Wacker Squad for the "wacky" personality of the detectives who transferred out of the main homicide division to join Shelton.

"Those guys really were wackers," says Det. Ray Barlow, one of the unit's most senior members.

In the beginning, the Wacker Squad was an ad-hoc group. It was not until 1980, when City Council cut back the police department's overtime funds, that the SIU was formalized.

The concept behind the unit was that the "line" homicide detectives, those who work on fresh murders, are so swamped with trying to solve crimes in the first few hours that they have little time to work on older cases. That problem was exacerbated when the budget cuts reduced the amount of hours homicide detectives could put in.

To work on the ever-increasing backload of unsolved cases, the department pulled detectives off the line.

"It is very important to solve a murder within the first hours," says Washlick, leaning on one of the large metal desks that make up the squad's ragtag decor. "You can never recreate a crime scene. Witnesses forget what they saw, or become hard to find."

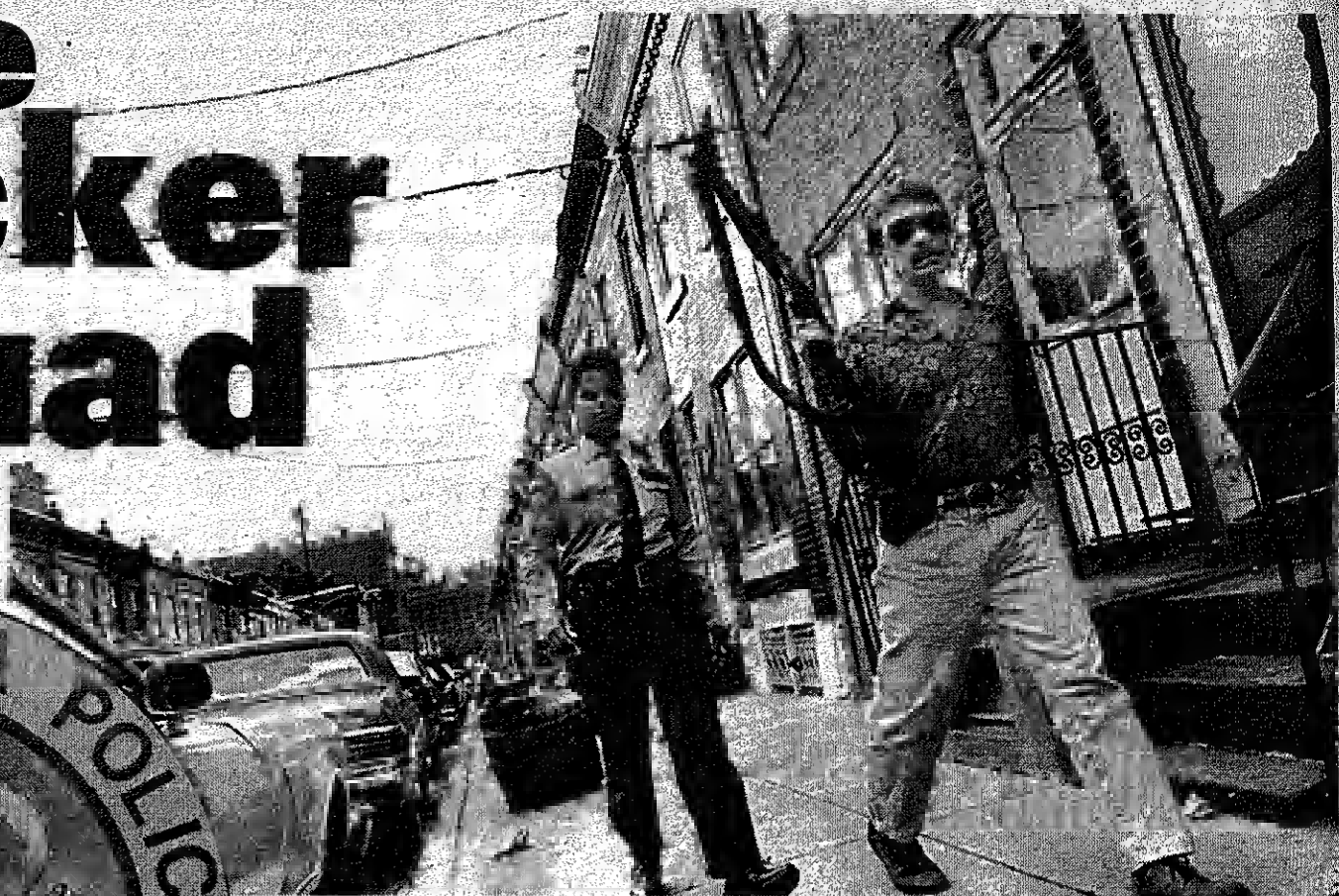
That's why it is so important to solve these crimes right away, and that takes a lot of work. As the numbers of killings increased, it became harder to work on the older cases or those that take more time.

Cases are assigned to the squad if the commanding officer, Capt. John Appeldoorn, determines the SIU is more "readily able to solve the case"; if the line squad supervisor determines that a case is solvable, but his squad no longer has the time to pursue it, or if SIU makes a request to work on a case that is more than 45 days old.

Finally, whenever the homicide division receives information about old unsolved cases, be it from prisoners who want to strike a deal or from a guilt-ridden witness who can no longer remain silent, they are turned over to the SIU for review.

Aside from older unsolved cases, the Wacker Squad is also assigned to high-profile task forces to work with federal and state law enforcement agencies. Earlier this year, the squad worked closely with a number of agencies to help solve the spate of La Cosa Nostra slayings. A few years ago, the squad worked with the U.S. Attorney's office and others to crack the Junior Black Mafia killings.

The SIU, says Washlick, has a luxury the rest of homicide cannot afford. His detectives spend their time reviewing old files, looking for angles that the line detec-



Police woman Patricia Faulkner and homicide detective Marty Devlin.



Reputed Drug Lord Stevie Blount

tives do not have time to pursue.

Overall, the homicide unit has solved, or cleared, about 83 percent of the 157 murders so far this year. Compared to a 63.5 percent clearance rate nationally and a 55.8 percent clearance average among the nation's eight most populous cities, Philadelphia's homicide unit is the best. The Wacker Squad, which has cleared more than 80 percent of its cases — a remarkable figure considering the difficulty of solving a murder after the first 48 hours — has played a significant role in that success, says Washlick.

"We get calls from police departments around the country," says Washlick. "They want to know how we do it."

But even with all the successes, there are still cases that haunt the unit.

Like the Frankford Avenue slasher, a case that has troubled Washlick. He spent years on the case. He spent hours talking to a man he thinks committed at least four or even five of the eight murders. But Washlick has not been able to gather enough evidence for the district attorney to convict him.

"Every day when I come into the office, I say a prayer that he won't kill again," Washlick says.

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As Worrell drives, Devlin sits next to him, the shotgun cradled in his lap, five red shells clutched tightly in his left hand.

"The sun always shines on the hunt," says Devlin, despite the drops of rain that splatter against the Grand Fury's windshield. "It don't get no better than this."

The two detectives want Blount.

Police say Blount ordered the killing of Wilbur Thomas Jr., 29, allegedly for robbing Blount's drug dealers.

The DA's office says Donyell Paddy, 25, is now on trial for pulling the trigger. The killing took place just two blocks from Blount's 2434 W. Oakdale headquarters.

If they can tie Blount to Thomas' killing, not only will they be putting away another murderer, they will also incarcerate someone they believe is the leader of one of the biggest drug gangs operating in the city. A gang, says Devlin, that has imprisoned an entire section of the city through intimidation, violence and the movement of tens of thousands of dollars' worth of cocaine each week.

Thomas' murder, says Worrell, was a vivid example of the drug-related homicides which account for a quarter of all murders in Philadelphia.

On the morning of July 17, 1989, a car pulled up to the stoop where Thomas was sitting and blasted him with automatic weapons fire. When Thomas tried to stagger away, Paddy allegedly followed, firing more bullets into Thomas.

Worrell and Devlin have cooked up a plan to smoke Blount — who lives, like many cops, in the Northeast — out of hiding.

Blount has been scarce for the last several weeks, ever since the *Daily News* began profiling the plight of the Sergeant Street neighborhood, and the police commissioner started flooding the streets there with uniformed officers.

The swarming police presence has badly hurt Blount's business. Corners that were once teeming with drug dealers are now clear.

"The boys have been laying low lately," says Devlin. "Things have been red hot."

Given the hurt on his business, Worrell and Devlin figure that the man they want to arrest for murder will answer any call to

sell drugs.

"It's not like he can withdraw money from a savings account or sell off some stocks or bonds if he needs cash," says Devlin.

The two cops pull up to a phone booth on 30th and Lehigh. Worrell gets out and dials Blount's pager. The hope, says Devlin, is that Blount will answer the page from

homicide. Rocks and Snell continued their investigation and found another of his girlfriends, who testified that Zayas had boasted about killing Fobare by crushing her head with a brick because she was going to tell police that Zayas had sexually molested her.

On May 11, 1989, almost two years after Fobare was killed, Zayas was arrested

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one of the neighborhood pay phones. He and Worrell know the telephone numbers of all the phone booths in Blount's territory (drug dealers use pay phones rather than risk having their property seized), so "If he [returns the page], hang! he's ours," says Devlin.

As Worrell gets out of the car, curious on-lookers, all black, gather around the two white detectives. In particular, they stare at the big gun in Devlin's lap.

"If you hear any shots, duck," he says.

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A good example of how the SIU works, says Washlick, is the case of Lisa Fohare, a 13-year-old girl who lived on the 6000 block of Torresdale Avenue.

On Nov. 15, 1987, Fohare's partially decomposed body was found under a pile of leaves in the woods near Poquessing Creek. Her skull was fractured. At first, homicide detectives had no motives and no clues about who committed the crime.

Faced with a difficult case that would take a long time to solve, the captain at the time turned it over to SIU almost immediately.

SIU detectives questioned everyone who had known Fohare and began to suspect her mother Sandra's boyfriend at the time, a mean-tempered man named Carlos Zayas. Zayas had concocted what detectives thought to be a flimsy alibi about why his van had been seen in the Poquessing Creek area around the time Fohare's body was dumped there.

But suspicion is not admissible in court without evidence. So detectives Boh Snell and Eddie Rocks, who is no longer with the squad, continued digging. They interviewed witness after witness. Soon they had a break. After years of keeping quiet, Lisa Fohare's mother, who did not want to believe that Zayas had anything to do with her daughter's death, broke down and told the detectives that Zayas had killed a former girlfriend named Theresa Meenan in 1980 and dumped her body in Camden. Officials there had ruled her death a possible drug overdose and forgotten about it.

Armed with testimony from witnesses, Rocks and Snell obtained an arrest warrant for Zayas on Dec 23, 1987. A month later, he was apprehended by police in Puerto Rico and extradited back to Philadelphia.

With Zayas now in jail for the Meenan

The killing was a matter of mistaken identity; Branch looked like Aaron Jones, the guy the killers were really gunning for.

The three-year hunt for clues uncovered that the killers, or doers (in cop terminology), were part of the infamous Junior Black Mafia. The investigation and resulting arrests in 1991 not only put the doers in jail, but led to the dismantling of the most organized and vicious black drug organization in the country.

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Worrell drives to the corner of 26th and Lehigh. From there he and his partner have a clear view of Blount's territory.

As they sit and wait for Blount to show up either on foot, or in his white Jeep or maroon Mercedes, two young black women walk by and sass the detectives. Being white guys with short hair sitting in a Grand Fury in Strawberry Mansion, Worrell and Devlin are easily recognized as cops. They laugh off the sassing and wait for Blount to make his move.

And wait.

And wait.

As they wait, a dispatcher's voice crackles over the radio; the call is about four armed young black males in a white Lincoln just a few blocks from where the detectives are parked.

For a moment, the detectives wonder whether they should assist in the search for the Lincoln. But they have another worry.

As the wait for Blount to return the page increases, it becomes increasingly likely that he won't. And that means going to Plan B: a visit to Blount's Oakdale Street headquarters.

Worrell and Devlin won't do that without backup.

"We don't think there will be any trouble," says Devlin. "But when you least expect it is when you get hurt."

But that backup may be delayed as the patrol car and van they need may be searching for the Lincoln.

"OK, this isn't working," says Worrell.



Lieutenant Joe Washlick looks over photos of the victims of a Philadelphia serial killer.



Homicide detective Julie Hill listens to distraught LeMoyne Johnson who lost her son Glen.

who radios in for the backup to meet him, as soon as possible, at 28th and Lehigh. "Let's go pay him a visit."

As Worrell wheels the car over to the rendezvous site, he talks about how even a massive police presence can't prevent violence.

"One time, we were making a homicide arrest," he says. "There were all sorts of cops out there. And then we hear 'pow-pow-pow,' automatic weapons fire going off. Just around the corner from where we were already making the bust."

It's a short trip to 28th and Lehigh. But once again, there is a wait. For the backup. Finally, after about ten minutes, two uniformed officers in a heavily dented Chevy Caprice patrol car pull up.

"These guys are the real heroes," Devlin says. "We cover the whole city. These guys know what's going on in the neighborhoods. Without them, we couldn't do our job."

Worrell instructs the officers about the job and then pulls away from the curb, following the patrol car to Blount's house.

"It's easy to spot," says Worrell. "It's the one with the red awning."

As soon as the police arrive, all hell breaks loose on the street.

A mother looking out a second floor window across from Blount's house spots the cops, who are rushing with guns drawn. She yells frantically out at her three children playing on the street, practically in the shadow of Blount's fancy awning.

"Children, get in the house," she screams. "Children, in the house now!"

It is too late, because before the kids can move the police are at Blount's place, practically tripping over them. The children, taken by surprise, freeze in place like deer caught in headlights.

Had anyone in Blount's house started shooting, the kids would have been caught in the line of fire.

Fortunately, there is no hostile reaction by the occupants of Blount's house. The cops announce themselves and rush in without incident.

Inside, Blount's sister, another woman, three guys and a little kid are just sitting around. On a bureau in the living room is a memorial to a guy named Brian Moore, victim of a 1993 homicide. But no sign of Stevie.

The sister, obviously upset at having the police show up, says her brother promised that he would turn himself in. Devlin informs her that "if he does, you won't see me no more. But if he doesn't, I'll be back here tomorrow."

Back in the car, Devlin is supremely confident.

"He'll turn himself in," he says. "You know that right now, his sister is on the phone with him, telling him to get his sorry ass into the police station so the cops will stop hothotting her. That's what we do this for. To keep the heat on."

With no more to do in the neighborhood, Worrell and Devlin head back to the Round House. Where, after a trip to the DA's office, they'll sit around and wait for Blount.

Driving down Ridge street, looking through the rain-soaked darkness at a dilapidated house that was, not too long ago, the site of another murder, Worrell shakes his head.

"The sad thing," says Worrell, over the sound of rain ping-pinging on the roof, "is that on every block in this city, I can spot a place where I did a job."

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Information is the key to solving a homicide.

Sometimes, as in the case of the Brian Moore killing, information will flow easily. Other times, as with the John Benjamin Simmons killing, information is non-existent.

Sometimes, the victims' families can be the highest help.

And sometimes, the detectives know the doer, but don't have the evidence to prove it. Like the Frankford Avenue serial killer.

Brian Moore was the victim of the perfect crime. His attackers practiced. They studied the route he walked near the corner of 22nd and Sergeant. They stalked him. Finally, on Sunday morning, Jan. 17, 1993, dressed in ski masks and gloves, they pounced.

Moore thought he was going to be the victim of a robbery, so he began to take off the gold chain he was wearing around his neck.

"We don't want your gold chain," one of the attackers told Moore. "We want

you."

The two men chased Moore down the street, firing as they went. Moore was hit, but kept running, until he came to an abandoned recreation center. Moore frantically slammed the door open and tried to hide, but the doers followed the trail of blood up to the second floor. They found Moore and fired again. They threw him out the window, and fired some more. Then, the two men ran down the stairs, saw that Moore's body still had some life in it, and fired again.

The two shooters then hopped in a car and escaped. No one saw their faces or took down the license. The line squad had no evidence to go on, so they turned the case over to the Wacker Squad.

After two months of hitting the neighborhood, the case began to unravel. The doers had one little problem. They couldn't keep their mouths shut.

Armed with testimony from the people the doers bragged to, police on March 8, 1993 arrested Alan Preshury, 21, of the 2800 block of N. 27th Street, and Maurice Revels, 20, of the 2300 block of Natrona Street.

The Wacker Squad has had no such luck in the case of John Benjamin Simmons, a 15-year-old boy who disappeared on Sept. 14, 1988, the first day of school.

He was listed as missing for five years, until April 4, 1993, when police from the 19th District responded to a call about a skull found at the Parkside Recreation Center. Three kids had found the skull and were kicking it around like a soccer ball. The skull rolled down a hill, and police later found the skeleton it came from at the top of the hill.

The next day, the medical examiner found that the cause of death had been a single gunshot to the head. The day after that, forensics identified the remains as John Benjamin Simmons.

To this day, police have no clues, something that frustrates Det. Dave Baker, and his partner, Det. Julie Hill, the squad's only woman.

"This boy has a mother who wants to know some answers," says Baker, who, along with his partner are the unit's newest members. And, according to their colleagues, among the best. "She has a right to know what is going on. But there is nothing we can tell her."

Families are often important in tracking down killers. LeMoyne Johnson, for instance, has kept a detailed chart of people she believes responsible for the July 7, 1993 killing of her son Glen Purdy, 24, and a friend, Dina Mallory, 20.

Purdy, who ran a drug corner, stopped at his favorite Chinese restaurant, catty-corner to his house, for some iced tea when he got iced by rival dealers. Mallory, who was pregnant, was killed for being a witness. Baker says that Johnson has been instru-

"One day, I was at his house, talking to him," says Washlick, his face visibly tightening as he speaks. "I got him to the point where he was no longer denying that he did it..."

mental in providing information about witnesses and suspects.

Like families, sometimes the police can't let go. The Frankford serial killing case is particularly haunting to Washlick.

Between 1985 and 1990, eight women were knifed to death in the area surrounding Frankford Avenue. Though police have not officially connected all the killings, the apparent connection in perhaps five of the cases was the way the killer eviscerated the women: cutting them from just above the vagina to just below the breasts.

After years of investigation, Washlick developed a suspect: a man in his 70s who



Sergeant Laurence Nodiff, Lieutenant Tom Quinn and detective Robert Snell in the S.I.U. office

lost his wife to cancer a few years before the killings began.

Washlick repeatedly interviewed the man, whose name he will not release. He learned the man had taken his wife's death very hard. From that, Washlick began to find a link; the first four victims were all around the same age as the man's late wife. Even eerier were their wounds. They matched a surgery scar on the man's late wife.

Typical of a murder investigator, Washlick spent countless hours trying to get into the man's head. He spent time with him, tried to win his confidence. He took an interest in the man's books, especially the underlined passages in the man's Bible. He listened intently as the man talked about ESP, balls and about seeing spirits in his sleep.

Washlick gathered information about the prostitutes hanging under the Frankford El from them, and other witnesses, he learned that his suspect befriended white prostitutes, but had sex with black prostitutes.

"This may sound strange, but I am convinced that the man felt that, if he slept with a white hooker, he'd be cheating on his wife and that it was OK to have sex with a black hooker."

Washlick even contacted the FBI, to see if they could work up a psychological profile on the killer. Unfortunately, the victims' lifestyles varied so widely that the FBI was unable to be of much help. The only common thread among the victims was that their lifestyles were so hazardous, contacts with potentially dangerous people were so common, that anyone could have done them.

Which made Washlick even more desperate to bring the killer to trial.

"One day, I was at his house, talking to him," says Washlick, his face visibly tightening as he speaks. "I got him to the point where he was no longer denying that he did it. He was talking about how hard it would be for him to go to prison. I thought I had him, but then he stopped talking. And that's when I've done a lot of soul-searching. It's hard to know that you are that close."

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The Wacker Squad's nook is in the far corner of the homicide unit, which is on the second floor of the Round House and is only by passing a men's room with a constantly open door. Their office is filled with furniture that looks like it was discarded by the Salvation Army.

The detectives sit on wobbly aluminum chairs. One needs a pillow because there is no cushion. Files are stored in huge old aluminum cabinets. Boxes and boxes of old work are heaped in piles, on shelves, in any space that's open.

By the time Worrell and Devlin return from a shift shortly after 4 p.m., the place is a mess.

Det. Dave Baker is, for a change, smiling. He and Det. Julie Davis had been looking for has come forward to testify about explaining the hours of paperwork that go into every arrest ("This is what we really do") sits at the computer, filling out the probable cause sheet. A sheet that, if presented to the DA, will lead to the arrest of a suspected killer.

Det. Bob Snell and Stephen Worrell are happy, too. Joanne Blair, a white woman, has come in with his wife, Rose.

But the happiness quickly fades as Blair offers a bargain offered by Asst. DA.

"Joey's going to have to learn he can't always play hardball," says Washlick. "Sometimes, you have to be a little more lenient if you want to get information out of these boys."

A federal prisoner, a witness who will testify against Blount, is brought in. Given a chance to call a girlfriend, the prisoner asks her to stop complaining and bring him some food, some deodorant, a washcloth and a change of clothing.

"Stop hollering in my ear, Yvonne," says the witness. "I'm not playing that right now."

As the witness tries to talk to his girlfriend, the detectives tell bad jokes and needle each other.

Det. Frank Dembeck is kidded for the suit he is wearing. He claims he dressed up because he had to make a court appearance. His colleagues claim it's because he's trying to impress a woman from California who happens to be in the same courtroom.

Sgt. Laurence Nodiff receives a healthy dose of abuse for the shirt he is wearing.

"You look like a cabana," says Dembeck about Nodiff, who, like several other detectives this day, is wearing a striped shirt. In this instance, a shirt with thick stripes of red and blue and green.

Worrell and Devlin are made fun of as well.

"I send you out with a car and two reporters and you still can't find Blount," jokes Nodiff. "Get back out there and don't come home 'til you find him."



22nd District police officers Patricia Faulkner and Roger Williams are called on for backup.

"Detectives Hill and Baker needed a new starter in their car. We also figured that they might as well get the thing inspected as well. It took more than a week to get the car back. And then, when they did, they

Streets is pretty good, too."

"But that *NYPD*, that's not so good," says Dembeck, adding that he knows what the Frankford Avenue killer eats: Corn Flakes for breakfast.

"How do I know that?" he says, feigning some Sherlock Holmesian detective skills. "He's a serial killer."

More time goes by. Detectives work the phones, trying to find reluctant witnesses or glean information from other cops. Devlin begins pacing the room.

"This is the *real* life in homicide," he says. "It's not what you see on TV."

Worrell goes down to the cafeteria, to bring the federal prisoner some food.

The spicy pork chop he brings back smells wonderful and looks succulent. But the prisoner is Muslim and eats no pork. Not one to waste anything, Worrell brings the plate over to a reporter standing along the wall by the boxes.

"Here," he says. "You look like you are wasting away to nothing."

Finally, the good news.

It is from Peter Bowers, attorney for Stevie Blount.

Blount is ready to turn himself in on a litany of charges that include murder, threatening a witness and illegal possession of guns.

"He didn't do it," the tan and dapper Bowers says, laughing at the question, proclaiming his client's innocence. "Mr. Blount knew that the police were looking for him for the last two days."

Why did it take so long?

"I was [in court]," says Bowers. "There never was any question that my client would turn himself in. I used to be a DA. These guys worked for me for seven years."

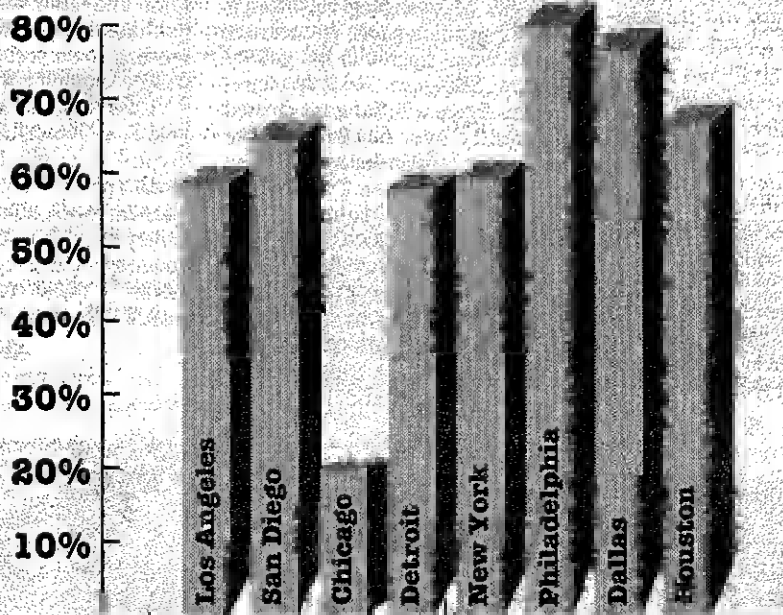
A few minutes later, an obviously satisfied Devlin says that despite Bowers' assurances, he was taking nothing for granted.

"Can't afford to," he says, smiling.

Devlin's satisfaction wouldn't last long. Between Wednesday morning and Thursday at 6 p.m., during the time Devlin and Worrell had completed their pursuit of Stevie Blount, three more Philadelphians had been murdered, bringing this year's total to 157. A fourth victim, Betty Jones, died at about 5:30 p.m. — two years after being shot.

For Devlin and the Wacker Squad, there's always plenty of work left to do.

1992 Homicide Clearance Rate



Most recent data available from the Federal Bureau of Investigations.

Devlin responds nonchalantly. "He'll be in," he says. "Don't you worry."

But Nodiff is worried. Not about Blount, but about whether the SIU will have enough cars to do their jobs.

Nodiff has spent a good part of the day trying to find the best way to convince the brass that the homicide unit needs 25 cars. Under the city's new vehicle fleet management policy, detectives are needlessly tied up because there are not enough cars and those they do have take far too long to repair.

"This is ridiculous," he grouses.

drove it for three blocks before it broke down again."

As the day wears on, detectives continue to kid Devlin about Blount. Some stop for a minute, to watch Montel Williams, whose topic for the day is, appropriately enough, "Teenagers who are tired of seeing their friends die."

Then the 5 p.m. news comes on. The big story on Channel 6 is... rain in the Delaware Valley.

Det. Vivarina notes that the closest television ever came to real life was *Barney Miller*. Dembeck chimes in "That Baltimore show [*Homicide: Life on the*